
11 CFR Part 201

[Notice 1993-26]

Ex Parte Communications

AGENCY: Federal Election Commission.

ACTION: Revised interim rules.

SUMMARY: The Federal Election Commission is revising its interim rules for handling outside communications made to Commissioner offices in connection with public funding, Commission audits, litigation, rulemaking proceedings and advisory opinions. In general, these communications are prohibited, in the case of public funding, audits and litigation; and are to be made part of the public record, in the case of rulemaking proceedings and advisory opinions.

DATES: Effective Date: These rules are effective on November 10, 1993.

Comments: The Commission will accept comments on these rules received on or before December 10, 1993, and may re-evaluate them in light of these comments.

ADDRESSES: Comments must be in writing and addressed to: Ms. Susan E. Propper, 999 E Street, NW., Washington, DC 02463.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Ms. Susan E. Propper, Assistant General Counsel, (202) 219-3690 or (800) 424-9530.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The Federal Election Commission is revising its interim rules for handling ex parte communications made in connection with public funding, Commission audits, litigation, rulemaking proceedings and the advisory opinion process. The revised rules complement those found at 11 CFR 7.15 and 111.22, which prohibit these communications in connection with Commission enforcement actions.

On December 9, 1992, the Commission issued interim rules on this topic. 57 FR 58133. The rules are codified at 11-CFR part 201.

While these rules became effective on the date of publication, the Commission provided a 30-day comment period and announced that the rules might be revised to reflect comments received during this time. Five comments were received in response to this publication.

In addition, the Commission held a public hearing on the interim rules on April 1, 1993. Three witnesses testified at this hearing.

The revised rules reflect these comments and testimony, as well as the Commission's further consideration of its practices and experience. The Commission is still considering these rules and therefore is publishing this revised version as a second set of interim rules. However, while operating under the current interim rules, the Commission realized that certain aspects of those rules were having some unintended consequences in areas such as litigation.

The revised interim rules prohibit substantive communications made by persons outside the agency to any Commissioner or member of a Commissioner's staff in connection with public funding, ongoing Commission audits, and litigation. Ex parte communications may be made to Commissioners in connection with rulemaking proceedings and advisory opinions, but they are to be made part of the public record. Finally statements made in public forums and inquiries as to the status of open proceedings are explicitly exempted from the definition of ex parte communications.

The Commission believes that these rules are necessary to avoid the possibility of prejudice, real or apparent, to the public interest. To maintain public confidence in agency proceedings, it is important that efforts to influence official actions be regulated in this manner.

The revised rules apply to communications made to Commissioners and all individuals serving under their personal supervision. The Commission also plans to consider recommendations for internal guidelines in this area for communications by Commissioners and Commission employees. References in the interim rules to ex officio Commissioners and their Special Deputies have been deleted following the D.C. Circuit's opinion in *FEC v. NRA Political Victory Fund*, No. 91-5360 (D.C. Cir., October 22, 1993). Should this decision be reversed, the Commission will consider what further action is necessary.

Discussion of Revised Interim Rules

Section 201.1. Purpose and Scope

This section summarizes the contents of this revised part.

Section 201.2. Definitions

This section defines the various terms used in this part.

Paragraph (a)(1) of the former rules defined "ex parte communication" for purposes of Commission audits and litigation, while paragraph (a)(2) defined the term in the context of agency rulemakings and advisory opinions. These definitions have been combined into paragraph (a) of the revised rules, which defines an "ex parte communication" as any written or oral communication made to a Commissioner or a member of a Commissioner's staff by any person outside the agency, concerning substantive Commission action in the public funding process, or any ongoing Commission audit, litigation matter, rulemaking, or pending advisory opinion request.

Paragraph (a) of the former rules further defined ex parte communications to include any written or oral substantive communication made by any Commissioner or any member of a Commissioner's staff to any person outside the agency. On reflection, the Commission has decided that these classes of communications should be handled differently, and that the rules themselves should be limited to incoming communications seeking to influence Commission action. Accordingly, references to outgoing communications found in the interim rules have been deleted. However, the Commission will be considering an internal agency directive that will govern outgoing communications by Commissioners and members of Commissioner's staffs.

Paragraph (b) is new, and for the first time provides a definition of what is not an ex parte communication.

One commenter suggested that, since the purpose of these rules is to regulate private, off-the-record contacts, the interim rules be amended to exclude statements made in a public forum. The Commission agrees, and therefore in paragraph (b)(1) has excluded public statements made at public conferences and similar events by any person from the definition of ex parte communication.

Paragraph (b)(2) excludes procedural status discussions of open proceedings that are intended to influence and do not have the effect of influencing Commission consideration under all circumstances covered by these rules.

The former rules had required that such inquiries be referred to the appropriate staff person.

Paragraph (c) defines "Commissioner" as an individual appointed by the President to the Federal Election Commission pursuant to 2 U.S.C. 437c(a).

Paragraph (d) defines "Commissioner's staff" to include all individuals working under the personal supervision of a Commissioner, including executive assistants and executive secretaries.

Section 201.3: Public Financing, Audits and Litigation

Ex parte communications made in connection with public financing, audits, and litigation are generally prohibited. However, the prohibition regarding litigation has been narrowed to cover only those communications that relate to a pending Commission decision on a particular case, such as whether to settle or appeal. This change will permit Commissioners to respond to inquiries regarding court decisions, apart from matters requiring further Commission deliberations. Since this is discussed in the section's introductory matter, paragraph (b)(3), which formerly dealt with this topic, has been deleted.

The former rules prohibited ex parte communications in connection with Commission audits. In addition, the Commission specifically invited comments on whether broader rules should be adopted that would apply from the time a candidate or committee sought eligibility to receive federal matching funds.

While none of the commenters or witnesses specifically addressed this point, the Commission has decided that the same circumstances that justify the imposition of a total ban on ex parte communications in connection with Commission audits are also present throughout the matching fund process. Questions that arise in connection with eligibility for funding are potentially as sensitive as those that arise in the subsequent audit. The fact that committees applying for public funds know in advance that their records will be audited increases the possibility that contacts made during the eligibility process will impact on the subsequent audit.

Paragraph (b)(1) states that this ban applies from the time a candidate or committee initiates proceedings to participate in the matching fund process. In the case of presidential candidates and committees, this occurs when a primary election candidate submits to the Commission the letter required by 11 CFR 9033.1(a), or

presidential and vice presidential candidates submit the letter required by 11 CFR 9003.1(a)(1). The ban applies to committees seeking convention funding from the date on which a committee registers with the Commission as required by 11 CFR 9008.12(a)(1) or 9008.12(b)(1). In each instance the ban remains in effect until the start of the audit process, which is subject to its own ban.

The Commission is required to audit the records of any presidential campaign that receives payments from the Presidential Election Campaign Fund. 26 U.S.C. 9007(a), 9009(b), 9038(a), 9039(b). If a party receives funding for its presidential nominating convention, the Commission is required to audit the records of the party's convention committee. The Commission is also required to audit the records of all convention host committees. 26 U.S.C. 9008 (g) and (h), 11 CFR 9008.9.

Paragraph (b)(2)(i) states that, for all public financing audits, the prohibition on ex parte communications begins when the Commission sends a letter to the committee asking that it make a pre-inventory check of its records prior to the commencement of audit fieldwork by the Commission. Commissioners' offices will be provided with contemporaneous copies of these letters.

The prohibition on audits of all publicly funded committees extends until the end of the audit process. This occurs when the Commission issues a final audit report ("FAR"), if the report does not contain a repayment determination. If the FAR contains a repayment determination, the process ends when the United States Treasury receives the final repayment check from the committee, or when the Commission authorizes suit to pursue the repayment.

The Commission is also authorized under its general administrative authority, 2 U.S.C. 438(b), to conduct audits for cause of any political committee that is required to file campaign finance reports under the Federal Election Campaign Act's general reporting requirement, 2 U.S.C. 434.

Under paragraph (b)(2)(ii), when an audit is conducted pursuant to 2 U.S.C. 438(b), the prohibition on ex parte communications takes effect when the Commission's staff circulates a document for Commission approval containing a proposed referral to undertake an audit, and extends until the Commission publicly issues the final audit report. If the matter is referred to the Office of General Counsel and there is reason to believe that a violation has occurred, the prohibition on ex parte communications made in connection with an enforcement matter,

found at 11 CFR 111.22, becomes applicable.

Paragraph (c)(1) states that a Commissioner or member of a Commissioner's staff who receives a prohibited communication shall attempt to prevent the communication. If the Commissioner or staff member is unsuccessful in this effort, he or she shall advise the person making the communication that it will not be considered.

Under paragraph (c)(2), if the Commissioner or staff member is unable to prevent the communication, he or she shall prepare a statement setting forth the substance and circumstances of the communication as soon after the communication as is reasonably possible, but no later than three business days after its receipt, unless special circumstances make this impracticable, or prior to the next Commission discussion of the matter, whichever is earlier. The term "special circumstances" includes such situations as illness and travel that can prevent more timely filing.

The statement must be delivered to the Designated Agency Ethics Official for placement in the file of the public finance matter, litigation case or audit. A copy of written comments must be filed with the Designated Agency Ethics Official within the same time period. This is similar to the Commission's existing rules regarding enforcement matters.

The new and former rules interrelate so that, if an audit or enforcement matter leads to litigation, the ban on ex parte communications extends from the start of the audit or enforcement action through the conclusion of any related litigation. The ban applies to both written and oral communications.

Paragraph (c) of the former rules required a Commissioner or member of a Commissioner's staff who received a request for the procedural status of an audit or litigation case to refer the inquiry to the appropriate Commission staff. This paragraph has been deleted, and its subject matter addressed in paragraph (b)(3) of section 201.2, *supra*. As already noted, that paragraph allows responses to such inquiries in ongoing proceedings.

Section 201.4. Rulemaking Proceedings and Advisory Opinion Requests

The Commission encourages members of the public to state their views on rulemakings and advisory opinion requests in writing, during the public comment period on each such matter. Communications prior to the start of a rulemaking proceeding or the receipt of

an advisory opinion request are also welcome.

All comments received during the public comment period for a rulemaking or advisory opinion request are made part of the public record. The Commission believes that this approach should also be taken with regard to ex parte communications received during or after a public comment period, so that all persons will have equal notice of the information before the Commission.

Paragraph (a) provides that a Commissioner or member of a Commissioner's staff who receives written comments on a rulemaking or advisory opinion once the rulemaking or advisory opinion process has started shall transmit the communication to the Commission Secretary as soon after the communication as is reasonably possible, but no later than three business days after receipt unless special circumstances make this impracticable; or prior to the next Commission discussion of the matter, whichever is earlier. If a Commissioner or member of a Commissioner's staff has a discussion that would qualify as an ex parte communication regarding a rulemaking proceeding or advisory opinion during the pertinent time period, he or she shall, within the same time frame, summarize the conversation in writing and transmit this summary to the Commission Secretary.

All such communications and/or summaries become part of the public record. The term "special circumstances" will be applied under this section in the same manner as under section 201.3(c)(2), *supra*.

As previously noted, the former rules governed all ex parte communications both made and received by Commissioners and members of their staffs. However, some commenters discussing advisory opinions and the rulemaking process argued that ex parte communications with the potential to influence Commission action are generally those communications made to decision-makers, and not by them. Further, some argued that Commission officials should be encouraged to solicit outside comments on these matters, so as to become as well informed as possible regarding the merits of different positions. The Commission believes this point is well taken, and will consider addressing it as part of the agency directive governing ex parte communications by Commissioners and members of Commissioners' staffs.

The Commission notes, however, that substantive responses to communications by Commissioners are covered by these rules under all

circumstances. For example, if a Commissioner contacts a person to request that that person provide views on a pending rulemaking, that contact would not be considered an ex parte communication nor would a statement by a Commissioner indicating his or her own views on the matter. However, any substantive response by the other party would trigger application of the rules; and any written response would have to be included on the public record (either from the commenter or the Commissioner).

One commenter suggested that the Commission shift the responsibility for summarizing an oral communication covered by this section to the outside party. However, the Commission believes that handling this internally will help insure timely summaries.

Some commenters suggested that those making oral ex parte communications be given an opportunity to review the summary of their comments before this is placed on the public record. The Commission believes that this would unnecessarily slow the disclosure process. The fact that the summaries are made part of the public record means that they will be readily available to any interested party.

Under paragraph (b)(1), the applicable period for rulemaking proceedings begins on the date a petition for rulemaking is circulated to Commissioners' offices, or the date on which a proposed rulemaking document is first placed on an agenda of a Commission public meeting. It extends through the conclusion of the rulemaking. This can occur at different times, depending on the course of a particular rulemaking: e.g., when a rulemaking petition is denied; when the reconsideration process regarding a petition is concluded; when final rules are promulgated after transmittal to Congress; or when the Commission concludes its consideration of any congressional action relating to a pending rule.

Under paragraph (b)(2), the rules apply in the case of advisory opinions from the time a request for an advisory opinion is circulated to Commissioners' offices, through the date the opinion is issued. The disclosure requirements also apply during any reconsideration of an advisory opinion, and any discussion of reconsideration.

Section 201.5 Sanctions

Some commenters suggested that the Commission add language on possible actions against those who violate these provisions. The Commission agrees that this is appropriate, and has therefore created a new section, 11 CFR 201.5, for

this purpose. The new section provides that a person who becomes aware of a possible violation shall notify the Designated Agency Ethics Official in writing of the facts and circumstances of the alleged violation. The Designated Agency Ethics Official shall recommend to the Commission the appropriate action to be taken, and the Commission shall determine the appropriate action by at least four votes.